DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 690 SO 006 995

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TITLE	A Student-Centered Approach to Social Studies. Profiles of Promise 18.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Boulder, Colo.; Social Science Education Consortium, Inc., Boulder, Colo.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	[73]
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Social Science Education Consortium, 855 Broadway, Boulder, Colorado 80302 ($10.00, 1 copy of 30 issues; $20.00, 5 copies of 30 issues)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Behavior Problems; *Effective Teaching; Elementary School Students; Grade 5; Individual Development; Individual Needs; *Learning Difficulties; Low Ability Students; School Environment; *Self Concept; Self Esteem; *Social Studies; *Student Centered Curriculum; Student Participation; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	Grand Island; Nebraska; Profiles of Promise

ABSTRACT

Jim Donovan conducts a child-centered rather than program-centered classroom. His fifth graders are often problem children but his techniques are useful for all children. He tries to help students develop respect for themselves and others, expand their interest in life, overcome emotional and learning problems, clarify values, and develop positive attitudes. Donovan attacks problems on an individual basis, but his social studies unit on divorce grew from the realization that more than half of this students are affected by the lack of one or both parents. Developing the whole child, not dealing only with problems, is the purpose behind his attempts to develop self-esteem by providing low-risk challenges that lead to success. Getting along with others, good personal habits, and widened horizons contribute to the development of the whole person too. Through dramatic projects, role playing, reading to first graders, and self-directed free time, Donovan tries to implement his goals. The child-centered approach used in his class may give other teachers ideas to adapt in their own classrooms. (JH)

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ED 087690

A Student-Centered Approach to Social Studies

With 25 fifth graders to teach, papers to grade, and extracurricular activities to supervise, what can a classroom teacher hope to do for the hyperactive child who pops up and down out of his chair all day? Or for the nervous, withdrawn girl sitting alone at the back of the room? Or for the young boy who consistently performs below his tested abilities? Identifying these children is easy; finding ways to help them is more difficult. Should a teacher even attempt to deal with the problems of such children in the regular class setting?

There is a classroom in Wasmer Elementary school, Grand Island, Nebraska, where many fifth-grade youngsters have found a warm, helpful atmosphere in which to grow and learn. The teacher in this instance is Jim Donovan, who has earned a reputation for his special ability to work with children during his 14 years of teaching. As a result of this reputation, he has had an unusually large number of children labeled as "problem" children placed in his classes. But his class is not just for difficult children, and neither is his approach. In fact, he starts with the same underlying philosophy and commitment in dealing with all students.

Basically, Donovan's approach is child-centered rather than program-centered. He tries to avoid seeing problem children and to see instead children with problems. Each youngster is viewed as an individual with unique quality and potential. Over the years he has come to believe that "no child will function as an individual until he appreciates himself--until he respects himself as an individual." Accordingly, Donovan has set the following objectives for his teaching:

1. *To help students develop respect for themselves as individuals.*
2. *To help students develop respect for others.*
3. *To expand the student's interest in life.*
4. *To aid students in overcoming emotional problems and consequent learning disabilities.*
5. *To assist students in clarifying values and developing positive attitudes.*

To accomplish these objectives Donovan has developed many projects and programs. Rather than activities which grow out of the subject matter to be taught, they are activities which stem from the needs of the students. Each endeavor is designed to help accomplish his stated objectives.

THE HEAD-ON APPROACH

Believing that children cannot learn if they are plagued by personal problems, Donovan chooses to meet such problems head-on. Sometimes the problems are individual. The withdrawn girl at the back of the classroom in Grand Island suffered from a bladder dysfunction which sometimes prevented normal control and caused the child embarrassment. Upon learning of this situation, Donovan called the girl aside and explained that he understood her problem, assuring her that it was shared by many other people, even some adults. He told her to ignore normal classroom protocol and simply leave the room whenever necessary without calling attention to herself by asking permission. This was a simple act on the teacher's part, but it proved to be a significant first step in releasing the tension which had barred the girl from social and academic success. By the end of the year the child was able to talk and laugh and even to play the role of Little Miss Muffet in a skit before the class.

Often, however, the problems are more complex, as in the case of a brother and sister who were hyperactive, distraught, and incapable of studying. First attempts to befriend them were met with stiff resistance, but eventually they began to open up. They were living with guardians because their own parents were separated. In time it was learned that the children were being taught to shoplift and steal by an older boy in the family. At Donovan's initiative, the case was taken to the proper authorities, and the children were placed in a better home. Before the year was over both children were gaining in confidence and achievement.

In this case and in others, Donovan uses available community resources to help children with their special needs. By establishing a close working

relationship with the director of the local Mental Health Association, he has been able to arrange diagnostic testing, special counseling, and therapy for students, without long bureaucratic procedures. In all cases he notified his principal before proceeding and keeps him informed of what is being done, but the arrangements are made by Donovan. Before referring a student to community agencies, he takes care to alleviate any apprehensions the child might have about counseling or therapy.

Not all personal problems are limited to individual students. Last year a background check of class members showed that of the 25 children in the class over half came from homes in which one or both parents were absent. These broken homes were the result of separation, death, or divorce. During the school year some of the divorced mothers remarried. The behavior patterns of children coming from disrupted home situations were similar, and many of the problem behaviors they displayed seemed to be related to their home life.

Using this common problem as his starting point, Donovan developed a social studies unit entitled "The Family and the Divorce." The specific objectives were to help students reach a better understanding of problems involved in family situations and to help them work toward solving those problems. The basic text for the unit was the book, *The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce*, by Richard A. Gardner (Bantam, 1971). The book is written expresely for children at the upper elementary level, and it deals with issues such as who is to blame for divorce, parental love, anger and its uses, and fear of being left alone. It also provides advice on how to get along with separated parents and step-parents. Throughout the text, full-page cartoons are used to illustrate the typical problems that lead up to and follow divorce.

During class time, students were given copies of the cartoon drawings from the book and instructed to color them, using colors that expressed the emotions they associated with the characters and events depicted. From the students' work, Donovan made colored slides to accompany a script based on the written content of the book. The final result was a slide presentation which was shown in two 45-minute periods and was used as a point of departure for discussion of the problems which many of the children were experiencing.

Before beginning this sensitive area of study, Donovan discussed his plans with parents in private conferences. Many of them welcomed his interest in helping their children to understand and cope with their problems. Several mothers visited class while the slide presentation was being shown, and the children were encouraged to take home the Gardner book which contains an "Introduction for Parents." Copies of the book were also made available by the Mental Health Association to any parents who were faced with such problems and needed guidance. Thus a project which grew out of the needs of several children developed into a project which served the needs of not only students but also their parents and ultimately the community as a whole.

DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD

While Donovan often deals directly with children or groups of children who have specific problems, he also attempts to provide an environment which will nurture growth and maturity in all the children he teaches. In line with his teaching objectives, he plans activities and projects which will support the development of the whole child. Goals such as building self-esteem, getting along with others, developing good habits, and widening horizons are not left to chance; class activities which foster such growth are specifically provided.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Because many children placed in his classes are lacking in self-confidence, Donovan has designed a small group activity aimed at building positive self-images. Students are divided into groups of three or four and asked to write something complimentary about everyone in the group. Each child then reads aloud the compliments that were written about him. The children who wrote the compliments are asked to explain why they wrote what they did. Youngsters who are shy in large groups are able to communicate more freely in the small group situation; each child learns some favorable things about himself as seen by others, and the exchange of compliments seems to help alleviate conflicts within the class.

Because self-image is closely related to achievement, the children are provided with many opportunities to succeed. When a child is identified as being low in self-esteem, he is directed toward activities which are low-risk, and in which he is sure to succeed. His assignments are carefully structured so that he is challenged but not intimidated. As his self-confidence builds, the child is encouraged to undertake more creative endeavors which require more risk but which also have greater pay-off in achievement.

An example of an esteem-building activity used by Donovan as part of his regular teaching came about during a history unit on Medieval life. The history study of the Europe left behind by colonists coming to America was combined with English lessons featuring Marguerite DeAngeli's *Door in the Wall* (Doubleday, 1972), a story about a boy growing up in Medieval times. To help bring the study to life, the class built a large model of a Medieval castle. The model helped the students develop a real feeling for the times they were studying, and in addition--and perhaps even more importantly--the model castle provided a visible demonstration of what the students could do.

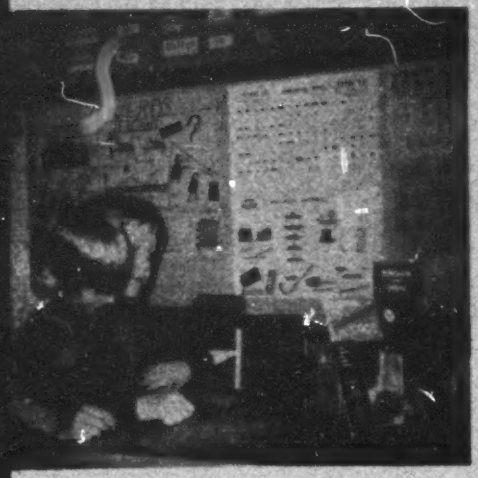
Not all children are capable of the same accomplishments, but to build confidence it is important that there be challenge. Since it is the practice

Difficult problems, such as drug abuse, are met head-on by Donovan and his students.

A model of a medieval castle represents both student involvement and student achievement.

A student points proudly to her "Best Citizenship" standing.

The opportunity to perform before peers helps promote student self-esteem.



Learning to transmit and receive in Morse code is a popular classroom activity.

Student concern for others is developed by participation in "Operation Blind Camp."

in Wasmer School to rotate teachers with classes of high and lower ability, Donovan often works with students of high ability. One of his most popular ventures with such a group was a unit on Space and Flight in which every interested child was encouraged to build a power model airplane or rocket. As the models were completed they were displayed overhead in the classroom. Toward the end of the year, a half-day field trip was devoted to flying the aircraft. During the 1973-74 school year Donovan has plans to involve his students in a project to rebuild small engines. The engines will be obtained from old powered lawn mowers which local citizens are ready to discard. As the engines are repaired they will be sold, and any profits will be used to finance other class activities.

Manual activities are popular with students and useful in building self-confidence, but there is more to self-esteem than manual dexterity. To reward students who put forth their best efforts on a day-to-day basis, the fifth graders in Donovan's class hold a weekly election to choose the "Best Student" and "Best Citizen" of the week. "Best" in this case does not mean the student with the highest grades, but rather the student who has most successfully worked up to his ability. Candy bars are awarded to winners and runners-up, while other children have various colored stars placed on a class chart showing the results of each weeks' voting. Every child receives some kind of recognition for his efforts, no matter how limited his abilities or accomplishments.

GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

While self-confidence is crucial to children, it is also important that they learn to get along with other people. Donovan finds a close relationship between the way a child regards himself and his ability to relate successfully to others. So building better interpersonal relationships is an important corollary to the development of self-esteem.

Many teachers use dramatic skits as a vehicle for illustrating events from history or literature. In Donovan's classes such productions serve the additional function of getting students to relate to each other by putting themselves on display. For the child who is a natural "show-off," these activities allow him a positive outlet for his inclinations. For the shy child, assuming someone else's character seems to make the experience of performing before peers a little easier.

Role playing also encourages the children to relate with new insight to both peers and problems. When studying social problems students are encouraged to act out situations illustrating difficulties such as those associated with drugs or alcohol. Single role playing experiences may not produce dramatic results, but the continued use of such activities does result in positive change.

Another technique for promoting interpersonal skills is to provide opportunities for helping other people. During the second semester, if children complete all of their assignments before the end of the day, they are allowed to spend the last 30 minutes reading to first graders. The fifth graders enjoy the opportunity to do something useful for an appreciative audience, and the first graders like the special attention they receive. Concern for others was also evident last year in a special class project to collect trading stamps to help send blind children to summer camp.

Though competitive activities are held to a minimum, Donovan occasionally encourages competition by getting members of the class to take opposing sides in support of some position, such as how they expect a science project to turn out. The penalty for the losers is to bring all the ingredients necessary to make cookies. The children make the cookies, the teacher provides the punch, and in the end, even the losers win. In the winning and the losing all the children learn a bit more about getting along with each other.

DEVELOPING GOOD HABITS

Most students are motivated by special events and projects and prefer them to routine classwork. However, in the Grand Island fifth grade the importance of regular assignments is also emphasized. To encourage completion of assigned tasks, Donovan has initiated a reward system. By keeping up to date on routine assignments, a student earns "points." With these points he may buy free time which can be used for reading, working on some personal project, or listening to the radio at one of the "listening stations" located in the classroom.

One listening station is particularly popular because it is equipped with a short wave receiver and earphones. The receiver is a powerful incentive for many children to get their work done and earn points. Donovan has a personal interest in ham radio operation, and has installed a 90-watt transmitter in the classroom to teach interested children to transmit and receive in Morse code.

At an age when nutrition is not usually uppermost in a child's mind, Donovan stimulated interest in developing good eating habits through a special unit combining science and social studies. The unit involved a seven-week experiment in food and nutrition, using white rats and literature provided by the American Dairy Association. During the seven-week period the rats progressed through stages of the life cycle roughly equivalent to the human years from infancy through teens. The children cared for the animals, built mazes, and made daily charts of data on the rats' growth and performance.

At the same time, the children also kept records of their own diet, exercise, rest, and health habits. At the end of seven weeks they made comparisons of the data and drew their own conclusions. In this, as in many of

their activities, the children were encouraged to discuss what they were doing in class with their parents. Some children wrote letters to their parents making suggestions for changes in the family diet and health habits.

WIDENING HORIZONS

An important part of "educating" is to arouse the child's curiosity and broaden his horizons. To do this, Donovan often reaches beyond the classroom to make use of community resources. The study of electricity is not inherently fascinating to all students, but last year's fifth graders now have more interest in the subject because of their visit to the power generating plant which serves Grand Island. The groundwork for the field trip was laid by first having the students study the fundamentals of electricity. This study was facilitated by use of the district's mobile classroom which has special equipment for teaching the basics of electricity. This preliminary study stimulated the students' interest in seeing the generating plant where the energy originated.

The local Chamber of Commerce has been cooperative in providing speakers for class studies. Last year, for example, a local pharmacist spoke to the students about how drugs, alcohol, and tobacco affect the human body.

Field trips and visiting speakers are not original ideas, but when they are planned with a view to widening the horizons and arousing the curiosity of students, they serve a special purpose in the classroom.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Although Donovan uses various traditional methods to evaluate the academic performance of his students, he does not depend on formal evaluation instruments to measure their progress in affective development. Rather, he relies primarily on his own observations and the observations of others to evaluate changes in the children's self-esteem, confidence, values, habits, and attitudes. When a reticent child begins to talk, a somber child begins to laugh, a belligerent child begins to make friends, or a non-student begins to study, who needs tests?

In addition to the remarkable changes that Donovan often sees in a child between September and June, he frequently receives reports from parents about how pleased they are with the changes they see in their child's behavior and attitudes. Former students frequently drop by after school to seek advice on a personal problem or simply to sit and chat.

THE CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

In reviewing Jim Donovan's teaching techniques, it is obvious that he brings many personal attributes to his classroom. He is a man of varied interests and abilities. His own experience of dropping out of school in the eighth grade then returning five years later to complete his education makes him especially sensitive to the problems of non-achievers. A year of teaching at the Nebraska Penal Complex stimulated his strong personal commitment to help children avoid a pattern of failure which could lead them to such an institution. These experiences have resulted in a dedicated and innovative teacher.

The talents Donovan brings to his Grand Island classroom are special. But every teacher has his or her own special abilities. It is not Donovan's abilities in working with students. While his devices are interesting, it is his basic approach to children that is central to his success.

Underlying his approach is the fundamental belief that education must be child-centered rather than program-centered. The needs of the students determine what happens in his classroom. Some of the needs are common to all developing children; other needs are personal and individual. But both kinds of needs must be met if the children are to succeed academically and socially.

Jim Donovan has achieved success by utilizing his personal talents and concern for students to develop special abilities in each student, no matter how hidden those abilities might first seem. The teacher who adopts the same approach may well find similar success with the "difficult" as well as the "not-so-difficult" student.

profiles of promise

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For further information on the subject of this paper

WRITE:

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READ:

Gardner, Richard A. The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce. New York: Bantam Books, 1971.

Miller, R. Warburton and Joyce Larayne Miller. Dealing with Behavioral Problems in the Elementary School. West Nyack, N.Y.: Parker Publishing Co., Inc., 1969.

Purkey, William Watson. Self Concept and School Achievement. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

ERIC DOCUMENTS

ED 073 081 - Teachers Should be Human Too. 31 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. This document indicates the practices and goals needed in educational programs in order to create more humanistic teachers.

ED 069 080 - Achievement Unlimited: Enhancing Self-Concept Through Improvement of Academic, Motor and Social Skills. 66 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. An experimental program, designed to improve students' self-concept and break their failure cycle is described. Students were provided with success experiences in social, motor, academic, and perceptual areas.

ED 067 583 - Behavior Patterns of Children in School. 82 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $3.29. This report indicates a strong positive relationship between rated ability or performance of children and their behavior ratings in school. Those rated above average in either of these two respects were more likely to be described as well adjusted or better behaved than their peers.

ED 064 698 - Teacher-Student Congruency and its Relationship to Reading Achievement in Grades Four Through Six. 92 pp. MF - $.65, HC - $6.58. Do teachers see their students the same way the students see themselves? What relationship does this congruency have to reading achievement? These two questions are the focus for this research study.

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